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ABSTRACT

Learning disabled children make up part of the population of "latchkey children," those who spend all or part of their before and after school hours alone. These learning disabled latchkey children experience special problems because of their unique learning and behavior characteristics. The paper discusses the specific problems facing learning disabled children in self-care experiences, including heightened levels of fear, difficulty in dealing with large amounts of unstructured time, social isolation and inadequate problem-solving strategies. The learning disabled child in self-care is at risk when alone and will require set routines, explicit instructions and alternative procedures. If possible it is better for learning disabled children to be in the care of others; if not, they will need additional support and guidance to stay alone, even for short periods of time. (CL)

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LATCHKEY AND LEARNING DISABLED:

SOME PROBLEMS TO CONSIDER

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ABSTRACT

Millions of children spend all or part of their before and after school hours alone. These children, referred to as "latchkey children" have problems dealing with self-care and are a growing national concern. Learning disabled children comprise part of this population, and experience special problems because of their unique learning and behavior characteristics. This paper discusses the specific problems learning disabled children in self-care experience. These problems include: heightened levels of fear, difficulty in dealing with large amounts of unstructured time, social isolation and inadequate problem-solving strategies. As a result, the learning disabled child in self-care is at risk when alone and will require special considerations.

LATCHKEY AND LEARNING DISABLED:
SOME PROBLEMS TO CONSIDER

Recent economic trends, the demise of the extended family, the high divorce rate and the sky-rocketing number of women entering the labor force, have changed the structure of the American family and caused an increase in the number of dual-career and single-parent families. Paralleling this increase is an upsurge in the number of children who are expected to supervise themselves for some part of most working days. These children, commonly referred to as "Latchkey Children", care for themselves before and/or after school. There are no reliable estimates of the number of children who spend part of each day alone, since most are coached by anxious and guilt-ridden parents to be discreet. However, popular estimates, range between five and ten million elementary school aged children, including children from all racial and socio-economic groups. Children with physical, sensory and mental handicaps are also found in this

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population.

Latchkey children spend an average of two to three hours unsupervised each work day, however, some are alone much longer than the average. In fact, it is not unusual to find children caring for themselves as much as eight to ten hours a day. Some children stay home with siblings while others are completely on their own. To be considered latchkey, however, a child must spend at least part of each work day without supervision from a competent adult. Latchkey children are also expected to care for themselves when they are sick or when school is cancelled because of snow, a teacher's meeting or a strike, since most parents cannot stay home from work to attend to the child. The scarcity of jobs and the economic necessities of life make accomodation to an unplanned school closing impossible. Vacations and holidays also pose a problem for children of working parents since parents work but school is out. Many children find themselves unsupervised eight to ten hours a day during these vacation periods.

The major problems children who care for themselves experience are fear, loneliness and boredom, but most latchkey children are also inadequately prepared to cope with the physical emergencies they may have to encounter. These include break-ins, fires, accidents, illness or even routine activities such as use of appliances, and

transportation to and from activities out of the home.

The learning disabled child home alone is going to face the same problems as any other latchkey child, however the learning disabled child has unique characteristics that will make self-care especially difficult. Many learning disabled children have sequencing problems that make learning routines and remembering ordered tasks frustrating. In addition many learning disabled children have difficulty with following directions, remembering things, reading and reversing, all of which contribute to the burden of caring for themselves or staying with siblings. Learning disabled children are often described as emotionally "labile",i.e. very uneven in moods, or behavior. As a result, many of the children have difficulties adjusting quickly to new situations, and may become disoriented or overly anxious when a routine or pattern of expected occurances changes. An emergency situation, therefore, may become even more hazardous.

The telephone plays a crucial role in the latchkey experience. It is, in fact, the lifeline for the child home alone and the outside world. Latchkey children use the telephone to call for both emotional support and to cope with physical emergencies. It is the child's link with his parents and community emergency services. Most latchkey children are expected to call their parents as soon as they arrive home.

This dependence on the telephone for a successful latchkey experience poses special difficulties for the learning disabled child. Reversals and sequencing difficulties, a typical problem for learning disabled children, make using the telephone, even under the best of conditions difficult. Misdialed numbers are more frequent and even numbers clearly posted by the telephone are likely to be misdialed. Under the stress of emergency conditions, the difficult may become impossible. The fears of a child who is frightened and trying to contact help are exacerbated by an inability to contact the desired resources. Under emergency circumstances, the learning disabled child should be taught to call the operator and ask for assistance, since even a well-posted number may be misread by the child.

While the telephone is the lifeline of the latchkey population, the television is the babysitter and companion. Latchkey children often watch as much as four to five hours of T.V. daily. During the the time their parents are away latchkey children generally also prepare a snack, do homework, chores and hobbies. The learning disabled child, who often has difficulty structuring free time, is more likey to depend on television for entertainment and stimulation for large blocks of time alone. Research demonstrates that watching excessive amounts of television can exaggerate the fears of children, since so much of the programming is

violent. Learning disabled children may also have difficulty in discriminating fact from fantasy. Some learning disabled children personalize the news programming, see detective or horror movies as reality and arm themselves with emergency weapons such as bats and lacrosse sticks in case of emergency.

One out of five latchkey children report high levels of fear. This fear is often manifested in nightmares. They may be afraid of the dark, and insist on lights being on in all rooms of the house or apartment after dark. Many children cope with this fear by hiding under beds and in closets or by watching excessive amounts of television as a distraction. Television is also used by latchkey children to combat loneliness and boredom. For many latchkey children, television is their only companion as they are instructed by anxious parents not to play outside or have friends in thee house. Because they spend their after school hours alone, latchkey children miss interaction with friends and may not develop the same level of social skills that children home with an adult develop, since they lack the opportunity to forge friendships and learn social behaviors.

Fear, loneliness and boredom, the three worst problems of all latchkey children, are exaggerated in the learning disabled population. Many teachers report that their learning disabled children are anxious in class, and likely

to have unrealistic fantasies and fears, much like younger children. As a result, the learning disabled child who is left at home, is more likely than the rest of the population to experience high levels of fear during the dark winter months or a summer thunderstorm. The majority of children who stay at home alone experience fears, loneliness, boredom and difficulty with problem-solving, however the child with learning disabilities may persist in these characteristics long after the normal child has grown past them. Research indicates that normal children have much less difficulty with being latchkey after the age of 12. Some do well even a bit younger. The learning disabled child, however, typically has less maturity at the same age as another child. The parents, therefore, may have a twelve year old child whom they consider to be responsible, but who secretly has great fears of being alone, and difficulty meeting the challenges of responsibility.

Boredom is another major problem for latchkey children and one that is of particular concern for parents of learning disabled children that are home alone. Often, the learning disabled child has little previous or current experience or practice with being responsible. A learning disabled child is typically placed in a school program, whether mainstreamed or special education, that is highly structured and provides many and varied methods to prompt

memory and structure thought. This is very effective programming for learning. However, when that child comes home from school and is expected to self-structure and self-discipline, the contrast for him is even greater than that of the non-learning disabled child. This inability to self-structure leads to heightened levels of boredom in the learning disabled child.

Loneliness is another major problem latchkey children have since many are required by anxious and guilt-ridden parents to stay inside and not let any friends in the house. Many use the telephone as a way to make contact with others and socialize. Children with learning disabilities are even more likely to be told to remain inside by parents since they are concerned about disorientation and vicitimiztion. Even children kept inside are not completely safe. Learning disabled children tend to be extremely naive and gullible. A person at the door who requests entry may convince the child quite easily that the parent has given permission.

Fires and other emergencies pose a very real threat to children in self-care. A child left in an unstructured situation is likely to make an inappropriate decision about how to handle an emergency situation, or may even create one through failure to react appropriately to a situation before it becomes an emergency. In one case of morning aloneness, a child was cooking some breaksfast for himself before leaving

for school. A fire started in the pan. The child opened the window to "put out the fire" just the way she "put out" the cat, and went off to school. The fire did major damage to the kitchen before it was discovered by a neighbor. This may work in reverse, as well. If the child uses poor judgement in a fire situation, he may only remember his parent's admonition to "not open the door for anyone" and run and hide in a closet, refusing to acknowledge the calls of firemen. This would be even more likely if the child felt responsible for the fire. It is this combination of emotional and cognitive difficulties that places the latchkey child with learning disabilities at additional risk when home without a parent or trusted adult. Other emergencies, such as routine injuries and accidents pose similar problems.

Children who stay home with siblings also report problems. Older siblings resent the responsibility, and may in fact, suffer personal anxiety in addition. The care of younger siblings restricts their freedom, and does not allow for peer interaction, even when it would be permitted by the parents. In addition, they complain that younger siblings are often difficult to control, and do not respond to their requests. This puts the child in the awkward position of having responsibility without authority. Younger siblings often complain that their brothers and sisters are not as

responsive as their parents, or as they would like them to be. Older siblings are perceived by their younger counterparts as overly authoritative and tyrannical in their demands. Children home with siblings have their unique problems although they do not experience the same levels of fear and loneliness that their home-alone counterparts report.

Latchkey children often have difficulty coping with siblings who are in charge of them and children with learning disabilities are no exception. When left with siblings, anxiety may vent itself in behaviors that are difficult to handle, and may lead to fighting within the household, or running off to get away from the older sibling. Children get lost, lose track of time, and often cause additional worry for their working parents. At the least, the learning disabled child manifesting these behaviors concerns his care- takers; at the worst the child puts himself at risk for getting into trouble on the streets. Most siblings are simply not personally equipped to handle the erratic behaviors which often characterize these children.

Latchkey children are often on their own before school, as well as after. Parents with early work hours may have to leave the children to wake and prepare for school without supervision. This also creates an anxiety laden situation, as the responsibility for getting up, getting breakfast and

getting to school fall on the shoulders of the child. For the learning disabled child, who often has difficulty with time (both telling time and perceiving time), this can mean missed school buses, tardiness and truancy. Many of these children would be unable to problem-solve a way out of such a situation by calling a neighbor who drives their child to school, or giving themselves some other "fallback" strategy. Of course, many children, including those without learning disabilities, would be at a loss to deal with a sudden plan change. Learning disabled children are likely to forget their contingency plan for getting to school, even if the parents had developed one in advance with him. The parent will typically discover that this situation exists, moreover, only when the school calls to question the child's absence or tardiness. The child is unlikely to divulge this problem willingly, as they feel that their parents trust them to get to school without assistance.

Latchkey children have difficulty with their aloneness, in general. Learning disabled children, as a result of their unique learning and behavioral characteristics, are more likely than average to be fearful, unable to structure time (leading to boredom), and have fewer problem-solving and emergency strategies than other children. They are likely to be less mature, less socially adept, and more in need of structured experiences. Parents need to be concerned about

providing set routines, explicit instructions and alternative procedures for this child. Learning disabled children are not likely to have a successful self-care experience. If possible it is better for learning disabled children to be in the care of others, if not they will need addtional support and guidance to stay alone, even for short periods of time.

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